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ABSTRACT

The differences between Elementary Secondary Education Act Title I program evaluation and minimum competency testing (MCT) are compared. Title I programs are characterized as follows: the objective is to supplement school experiences for economically educational programs emphasize reading and mathematics; supplementary instruction is provided by certified specialists; evaluations measure relative program progress; test scores should be relatively normally distributed; and tests assess a wide range of objectives and are appropriate across several grades. For MCT: the testing programs are largely the result of the demand for accountability; helping underachievers is a secondary priority; the main objective is to assess the proficiency of examinees and to categorize them; students are given remedial work by regular classroom teachers after they fail the tests; MCT is an absolute measure of status and a one-measure assessment aimed primarily at the low end of test score distribution; and items usually measure skills considered essential for functioning in the present or next grade. However, the authors conclude that the goal of both programs is to improve student performance in basic skills. Ways of using MCTs in Title I programs as selection and diagnostic tests are suggested. (MH)

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Proficiency Testing and Compensatory Education Program Evaluation: Partners or Competitors? A Federal Perspective

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Before attempting to answer the question posed in the title of this paper, it seems reasonable to discuss some of the basic similarities and differences between Proficiency Testing and Compensatory Education Program Evaluation. ESEA Title I will be used synonymously with Compensatory Education, as the authors are most familiar with this program and most state compensatory education programs build on basic Title I concepts. To clarify further the discussion, both areas will be viewed from the philosophical, programmatic and methodological perspectives.

Philosophical

Title I is the largest federally funded educational program for elementary and secondary schools. There are now approximately 14,000 participating districts with an annual budget of approximately $3 billion. The program is aimed at supplementing regular school experiences for economically disadvantaged children and youth. Title I was the largest part of President Johnson's Great Society programs in elementary and secondary education. It was an attempt to improve the health and educational achievement of disadvantaged children and an attempt to provide poor parents with a voice in planning their children's school programs.

In contrast, Proficiency or Minimal Competency Testing (MCT)[1] has arisen as a result of state legislatures demanding accountability from students and schools. To some extent, MCTs label those who are most in need as educational failures or potential failures. In Title I the emphasis is on helping low-achieving students, while in MCT this is a

1 For convenience, Proficiency Testing, which is often used synonymously with Minimal Competency Testing, will be referred to as MCT in the remainder of the paper.

secondary priority. Clearly, Title I was a response to the liberal educational trends of the 1960's and MCT was a response to the more conservative politics of the 1970's. [2]

Programmatic

Title I is primarily an educational program, with emphasis on reading and mathematics, whose goal is to improve the relative knowledge of students to compensate for the damaging effects on educational achievement of being economically disadvantaged. MCT, in most cases, is not primarily an educational program but a testing program whose purpose is to assess the proficiency of examinees in certain skill areas.

In MCT special instruction may be given after a student has been identified as not meeting minimal skills, but the important point is the emphasis given to testing versus instruction. In MCT the emphasis is on categorizing students into certified and non-certified groups, while in Title I the emphasis is on the program improving the relative skills of students and testing is used as a tool to increase the probability of meeting program goals.

Furthermore, the instructional strategies usually used in Title I programs are different than those employed in programs designed for students who fail MCTs. The most important difference is that the Title I program is designed to supplement regular instruction whereas the student failing the MCT is usually given "remedial" work.

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2 The current Title I evaluation requirements proposed by USOE (see the February 7, 1979 Federal Register) are a result of the trends in the 1970's towards accountability in education. The law on which these requirements are based was first passed in 1974, about the same time that the MCT movement started becoming popular. Thus although MCT and Title I encompass different educational philosophies, Title I evaluation policy is now affected by some of the same factors which led to the MCT movement.

Instruction for the remedial student is usually the responsibility of the regular classroom teacher who may not be trained to provide the specialized instruction needed. Sometimes responsibility for remedial instruction is delegated to a paraprofessional or even to a teacher's aide. The instruction received by the Title I student, in contrast, is usually provided by a certified reading or mathematics specialist who is assisted by a trained paraprofessional. The Title I student often leaves the regular classroom, travels to a specially equipped reading or mathematics laboratory, and participates in activities specifically designed to supplement regular school instruction, sometimes with materials that have been developed using instructional design procedures. In Title I the emphasis is on the instructional program, with evaluation used as a tool for program improvement; in MCT the emphasis is on testing, not instruction.

Methodological

Evaluation vs. status indicator. A Title I evaluation measures relative program progress. As indicated in the U.S. Office of Education's draft regulations on Title I evaluation, which appeared in the Federal Register on February 7, 1979, the effect of participation in the Title I project is defined as "the difference between the Title I children's performance on a test administered at the end of the project and an estimate of what that performance would have been if these children had not received Title I services." Thus, progress or program impact is defined in the classical experimental design sense, i.e., to demonstrate program impact project participants must learn more than an identical group of students not receiving the program. MCT, on the other hand, is an absolute measure of status and should not be classified as evaluation under an experimental

design definition -- students may even show large gains on MCTs from grade to grade but not demonstrate program impact from an evaluation perspective.

Test score distribution. A MCT is a one-measure assessment aimed at measuring most effectively at the low end of the test score distribution. It should be very easy for good and average students unless one is willing to accept the situation that many average students are not minimally competent.[3] A test used for Title I evaluation, on the other hand, should have a relatively normal distribution of test scores because average and above average students should not be in Title I programs. The test should discriminate best in the middle part of the score distribution. This, of course, may often mean that when using a commercially-produced norm referenced test, an instrument should be selected that is one or more levels below the recommend level for the grade.

Testing. Usually both MCTs and tests used for Title I evaluation assess performance in reading and mathematics, are designed for group administration, report at least one score for each examinee and have been standardized through trial administrations. However, there are major differences. MCTs (except those used to test for high school graduation) usually restrict items to skills considered essential for functioning in the present grade or progressing to the next grade, whereas most tests used for Title I evaluation test a wider range of objectives (they are appropriate for several grades); and MCTs are generally state or locally developed and tend to follow the state or local curriculum more closely than tests used for Title I evaluation.

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3 Although some of those advocating MCT claim that the standards should be absolute, if "too many" students are found to be lacking minimal skills, the definition of minimal would certainly be changed.

Conclusions

While philosophically opposed and taking somewhat opposite methodological approaches, the goals of both Title I and MCT are to improve student performance in the basic skills. Title I is primarily a basic skills educational program and MCT will certainly influence basic skills educational programs. However, as previously discussed, the types of instructional approaches used in the two areas are usually different.

One could make a logical case for Title I and MCT to work together more, and even to consolidate funds.[4] One possible way for MCTs to be used in Title I might be as selection/diagnositic instruments. That is:

1) Students who passed the MCT and whose scores were not low enough for Title I would remain in the standard school program.

2) Students who did not pass the MCT but whose scores were not low enough for Title I would receive remedial instruction in the areas of deficiency.[5] This could be individualized on small group instruction, as long as the type of instruction was not in conflict with state or federal statutes.

3) Students who did not pass the MCT and whose scores were low enough for Title I services would receive the supplemental Title I services and remedial instruction in the areas of deficiency.

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4 In the 1978 Education Amendments (P.L. 95-561, Section 132), Congress attempted to permit districts to use state and local funds in Title I schools (without being in violation of the supplementing not supplanting rule) to run a total compensatory education if the total allocation that a school would receive would equal the maximum funding allowable under Title I.

5 This would be an unlikely situation unless the MCT pass score was set so high that one-third or more students failed.

4) Students who passed the MCT but whose scores were low enough for Title I would receive the supplemental Title I services (this is more likely than situation 2).

Some test developers would not agree that MCTs and tests used as part of the Title I evaluation process. They might argue that MCTs should be constructed to measure "life skills," whereas tests used for Title I evaluation should be more curriculum oriented. We would disagree with this viewpoint and side with Levin (1978) who has indicated that MCTs, or any other tests which claim to measure "life skills," really do not. Our conclusion is that a MCT should reflect the regular reading and mathematics curriculum as closely as possible. Such tests would probably be fairer to examinees and more technically adequate than tests which purport to measure "life skills." Furthermore, they would more likely be applicable for evaluating compensatory educational programs, reducing the testing burden on examinees; and, if the compensatory educational evaluation evaluation and the MCT program were administered from the same office, would likely lead to more efficient program management. Those individuals possessing minimal skills on curriculum-based tests will not necessarily be able to master adult "life skills" but should have a better chance of mastering these skills than a person without minimal curriculum-based skills. Those with good mathematical skills will probably be able to balance a checkbook without formal instruction and those with good reading skills will probably be able to complete accurately a job application.

References

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